

# **The System Belongs to God**

Study Guide  
VHS #2890

## Introduction

This series has been called “fresh,” “relevant,” “challenging,” “provocative,” and “full of hope.” There are many new ideas, new ways of thinking about old ideas, wonderful stories and metaphors, hot button issues.

On the one hand, not much is required of the leader beyond previewing each program and becoming familiar with a few definitions and ideas. But on the other, much is required of all who undertake this study—eagerness to think new thoughts, concern about how faith connects with daily life, willingness to struggle once again with the relevance on the ancient biblical texts.

Here is some information that may come in handy as background.

**The Principalities and Powers:** This is one of those common but obscure Bible terms most of us pass right over. Yet daily we deal with “the powers that be”—people that head the government, companies, churches, and even our families. And according to Walter Wink, “the Powers That Be are more than the people that run things. They are the systems themselves, the institutions and structures that weave society into an intricate fabric of power and relationships.”

“These Powers surround us... (and) they are necessary.” They do great good, but they “are also the source of unmitigated evil....Often they do both good and evil at the same time.”

We lament massive layoffs, but even in the best intentioned companies often “decisions are dictated by larger economic forces.” The people in power “are, in fact, more or less interchangeable.... Their decisions in large part are being made for them by the logic of the market.... Greater forces are at work—unseen Powers—that shape the present and dictate the future.”

**30 Years of work:** Since the 60’s, Walter has been in pursuit of an understanding of these Powers. “It was their invisible dimension that most fascinated me. Religious tradition has often treated the Powers as angelic or demonic beings fluttering about in the sky. Behind the gross literalism of that way of thinking, however, is the clear perception that spiritual forces impinge on and determine our lives.”

“There is more to what goes on in the world than what newspapers or newscasters report. I was prepared to wager that our ancestors were in touch with reality when they spoke about the Powers, and that they might even know something our society had lost.”

In the course of his work, Walter came to many quite helpful and hopeful understandings and conclusions that he elaborated in three books. It is on these that the video series is based.

*Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament (1984)*

*Unmasking the Powers: The Invisible Forces That Determine Human Existence (1986)*

*Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination (1992)*

Walter has written a popular version of the third book, called *The Powers That Be*, from Doubleday. The previously quoted material is from the introduction to that book.

**Walter the Teacher:** A man with extensive credentials—Professor of Biblical Interpretation at Auburn Theological Seminary in New York City; an ordained minister of The United Methodist Church; creator of what has become a classic whole-person Bible-study method first published in *The Bible in Human Transformation (1973)*.

Whatever he does, Walter seems to be preeminently a teacher of the Bible. In addition to doing extensive research and writing books on the Powers, Walter, working usually with his wife June, has led workshops across the country and abroad—in churches, retreat centers, prisons. So the material he presents in this series has also been presented and discussed widely.

## **The Conversation**

In keeping with Walter's conversational method of teaching, this series features a conversation between Walter and two pastors who have been greatly influenced in their ministry and lives by the books on the Powers. In each program, Walter presents a reflection on the subject at hand and then turns to his friends for their reactions. The hope is that, having heard this conversation, your group will turn to each other to continue it.

### **Walter's Friends:**

**James Forbes:** Senior minister at The Riverside Church in New York City; named by *Newsweek* in 1996 as one of the country's 10-best preachers; active in the Civil Rights Movement; professor of preaching at Union Theological Seminary in New York before he went to Riverside Church.

**Janet Wolf:** Pastor of Hobson United Methodist Church in Nashville, Tennessee; known for her ability to tell stories, for her skills in leading Bible study and for her preaching; long known for her work for and with the poor and dispossessed; worked as a community organizer, including setting up local and state hunger advocacy groups.

## **The Guide**

In an easy-to-copy format, this guide provides: 1) the **Introduction from the Video**; 2) **Bible Passages** referred to in the program; 3) **Definitions/Ideas**, intended to be read by the group before seeing the video; 4) **Topics That Stand Out**, to help the viewers keep track of the conversation; and 5) the **Discussion Suggestions from the Video**.

Preview the video before using it with a group; make sure a VCR and TV set or monitor have been set up and are working; and cue the tape up to the opening.

After an opening prayer or a reading from one of the Bible passages or one of the quotes, suggest everyone read through the Definitions/Ideas. Also point out the Topics That Stand

Out list is there to help keep track of the conversation. Encourage viewers to note anything that may want to discuss, but look at each program in its entirety before discussing the suggestions at the end and other concerns some may have.

**If you have more time:** Having watched the program without interruption, you may then want to replay it stopping at discussion points. Beginning on page 12, you will find **Additional Suggestions for Discussion.**

## **Additional Resources**

### **Books:**

Walter Wink, *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1984.

Walter Wink, *Unmasking the Powers: The Invisible Forces That Determine Human Existence*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1986.

Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992.

Walter Wink, *The Powers That Be*. New York: Doubleday, 1998.

Walter Wink, *Transforming Bible Study*, Second Edition. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989.

### **Videos:**

*Whole and Forgiven: A Bible Study Experience With Walter Wink*. Six programs.

# 1. The Way Things Are

**Introduction from the Video:** *Is the way things are the way they have to be? Not according to Walter and his friends Janet and Jim. And long before that, not according to Jesus. He had a vision of a different way that he called the Kingdom of God and Walter calls "God's domination-free order." But violence and exploitation and the domination of others, if anything, seems to be on the rise. Let's listen as Walter talks about the origin of violence and domination and as the three of them talk about transformation.*

## **Bible Passages:**

**Genesis 1:1-2:3**

**Luke 4:1-13**

## **Definitions/Ideas:**

Myth of Redemptive Violence: "...violence is the only thing that ultimately works, the only thing that will save us, when you come right down to it."

Domination System: "...some claim it is their right to lord it over others, to have more money than others, to have more power than others, to be treated preferentially. And this system is everywhere present in the world."

God's Domination Free Order: "...gives content to the Kingdom of God...where equality is brought about and domination is ended and women are treated the same as men and the rich and poor are no longer divided by this huge disparity of wealth...where there's compassion and love for all."

Resurrection as God's Vengeance Redefined: "...something happens and it has to be set right...when Jesus is crucified...God's restoration of the whole mess comes in resurrection...the most wonderful gift of nonviolence..."

## **Topics That Stand Out:**

- I. The Myth of Redemptive Violence
- II. The Domination System
- III. The Kingdom: God's Domination Free Order
- IV. Resurrection as Vengeance Redefined
- V. Building a New Order Inside the Old
- VI. Baptism Transforms

## **Discussion Suggestion from the Video:**

*Now, continue the conversation by talking about the first time you noticed systemic injustice, that some people were treated badly by society.*

You may want to break into small groups so everyone who wants to gets a chance to share a story.

## 2. God Won't Give Up

**Introduction from the Video:** *A lot of people are ready to give up on institutions (the biblical "powers") and you may be one of them. The government seems to be owned by special interests and the big corporations. Companies appear to care more about profit than people. Schools aren't educating. And many even consider the church to be irrelevant. But what if all the well-intended institutions were in some way created by God and can be redeemed? And in general, what difference would it make in your life if you understood the system belongs to God?*

### **Bible Passages:**

**Genesis 10**

**Revelation 2 and 3**

**Romans 13**

**Revelation 21 and 22**

### **Definitions/Ideas:**

The Powers Are Good: "People cannot live individualistically...have to have families...nation...economy...so it is, we might say, the will of God that there be institutions, systems and structures."

The Powers Are Fallen: "Just means they are no longer in harmony with God's divine purpose."

The Powers Can Be Redeemed: "God's trying also to transform institutions and structures...what Christ did to redeem the world was done not just for us, but also for the social systems in which we work."

The betrayer [Judas] "is the person who holds the highest ideals you can imagine and is using them against you."

### **Topics That Stand Out:**

- I. The Necessity of Institutions
- II. At Once Good and Fallen
- III. Redemption for Institutions
- IV. Can Churches Be Fallen?
- V. Judas Is There
- VI. God Won't Give Up

### **Discussion Suggestions From the Video:**

*Have you seen any of these flashes of light Walter was talking about? Do you know stories of institutional transformation?*

### 3. What Jesus Really Said

**Introduction from the Video:** *How do you explain Jesus' instruction to turn the other cheek or go the second mile? Well, the last one is easier, isn't it? We often extend ourselves for others as that one seems to call for. But what if this teaching isn't about extending ourselves at all (not that we shouldn't; there are certainly teachings that support sacrifice). But what if these examples are about how to resist evil without becoming or doing evil? And if that's what it's all about, how could we live it out?*

**Bible Passage:**

**Matthew 5:38-41**

**Definitions/Ideas:**

Nonviolent resistance or nonviolent direct action: “Jesus is not saying don't resist evil. He's saying don't resist evil violently. But resist it a different way—nonviolently.”

**Topics That Stand Out:**

- I. Resisting Evil Without Doing Evil
- II. Examples from Jesus' Teaching
  - a. Turn the Other Cheek
  - b. Give Him Your Cloak Also
  - c. Go the Second Mile
- III. What Jesus Meant

**Discussion Suggestions from the Video:**

*OK. If this is what Jesus said—that we should indeed resist evil, but nonviolently, how will you act differently? Maybe the first question is: In what forms do you encounter evil?*

## 4. How to Fight Without Hitting

**Introduction from the Video:** *We know about violence. It's everywhere—if not in our daily lives, on the front page and on the six-o'clock news. And we know about extending ourselves and even not returning evil for evil. But what do we know about resisting—even defying—evil without using evil methods and what do we know about making our weakness our strength? We'll listen in as Walter, Jim and Janet struggle with this challenge.*

**Bible Passage:**

**Matthew 5:38-48**

**Definitions/Ideas:**

Nonviolent resistance or nonviolent direct action: "...what Jesus is talking about is not non-resistance...but nonviolent direct action...a very militant strong position."

**Topics That Stand Out:**

- I. Loving One's Enemy
- II. Nonviolence vs. Non-Resistance
- III. Nonviolence for Violent Persons
- IV. Forms of Violence in Our Society
- V. Turning Weakness into Strength

**Discussion Suggestion from the Video:**

*Like the prisoner, it may be that you have engaged in nonviolent resistance and not even known it. Reflect on that possibility and share experiences with each other.*

## 5. What if Nations, Companies and Churches Had Angels

**Introduction from the Video:** *Institutions are impersonal. Right? But sometimes they seem to have a life of their own. In fact, Walter, taking his cue from the Bible, says that every institution (the Biblical “powers”) has at its heart a spirit, or using that Biblical term, an angel. Now that’s not exactly the way a lot of people think about angels today. And it’s a hard thing for us to relate to. But what would it do to our expectation that institutions might change for the better, become life-giving, if we just imagined IBM and the government and our own churches and families each having at its heart a living entity created by God that has the potential for good as well as bad, just like we do?*

### **Bible Passages:**

**Revelation 2 and 3  
Daniel 10**

### **Definitions/Ideas:**

Angel: “in every church a spirit or a spirituality...a kind of corporate personality that takes in the entire congregation but is sort of the core or heart of that congregation’s life.”

“...a hospital has an angel. And you can sense fairly quickly whether the hospital exists in its own mind to serve the patient or to serve the doctors or nowadays to serve the HMA.”

...angel carries the divine vocation of that congregation...angel is not only whatever the congregation is and has become but the angel still bears a sense of what the congregation ought to be...”

### **Topics That Stand Out:**

- I. Inner Spirituality of Institutions
- II. Do Angels Fall?
- III. Fear and Transformation
- IV. Fear and the Angel of the Nation
- V. Angels for Corporations
- VI. One-armed Angels?
- VII. Transforming the Powers

### **Discussion Suggestions from the Video:**

*Name a couple of institutions that seem to have lost their vocations. What are their vocations? What would you do differently if you expected them to live out their vocations?*

## 6. How You See the World

**Introduction from the Video:** *In this program, as in much of this series, we are like fish trying to see the water we're swimming in. Why does it matter that we see the water when so many generations haven't? Walter contends that the way we see the world determines whether and how we do many important things. We may want to change a particular behavior we dislike (for instance, berating our bodies because they aren't perfect) but we're locked into behavior by the way we see the world on that subject. Put another way, this program is about where God is for you. Now that matters a lot!*

### **Bible Passages:**

**John 6**

**1 Corinthians 3:16-17**

### **Definitions/Ideas:**

Worldview: "...determines how you see reality. Where is heaven? Where is earth? What's visible? What's invisible? What's real? What's unreal?...Worldview basically defines reality for you."

### **Topics That Stand Out:**

- I. What's a Worldview?
- II. Five Worldviews
  - a. Ancient (Biblical)
  - b. Spiritualistic
  - c. Materialistic
  - d. Theological
  - e. Integral
- III. Worldviews in Conflict
- IV. Signs of God in Our Midst
- V. Worldview and Prayer
- VI. Worldview, Our Bodies, and the Earth
- VII. We Get to Choose

### **Discussion Suggestions from the Video:**

*Do any of these worldviews still have a grip on you, even though you don't believe in them anymore? How about materialism?*

## 7. Praying for the Big Picture

**Introduction from the Video:** *What's going on when we pray and God doesn't seem to answer? Maybe prayer mainly changes us, not God. Maybe God isn't going to interfere with what God has set in motion. Walter's work on the principalities and powers suggests another possibility—that institutions and structures and systems have the same freedom to interfere with God's will that people do. So even though prayer gets answered, changes things, the answer comes always in a context that involves not just the person praying but everything and everyone else.*

### **Bible Passages:**

**Daniel 10**

**Genesis 32:22-32**

**Mark 6:1-6**

**Romans 8:26-27**

The translation of Daniel 10 that Walter reads is from *The Good News Bible*, Today's English Version, published by the American Bible Society.

### **Definitions/Ideas:**

Freedom and God's Will: "...most of us know that God will not interfere with our freedom of will...the principalities and powers that rule the world can also be disobedient to God..."

### **Topics That Stand Out:**

- I. Daniel 10: God's Response Blocked
- II. The Powers Interfere with God's Will
- III. Prayer Affects the Powers
- IV. Prayer and Our Concept of God
- V. Prayer Changes Everything

### **Discussion Suggestions from the Video:**

*What are some situations that don't seem to change with prayer where there are clearly powers involved? How might you change your prayer to include those powers?*

## **Additional Suggestions for Discussion**

### **Program 1**

1. TV cartoons and comics are not the only places we encounter the myth of redemptive violence. You might talk also about movies, prime time TV, TV news, novels, toys and real life.
2. Do you agree with Walter that the myth of redemptive violence is the most powerful myth in the world today? Why or why not?
3. Walter says the churches have never agreed that domination is wrong. What do you think?
4. ‘The Kingdom of God’ has been a difficult concept. Does ‘God’s domination-free order’ help you understand it?
5. Do you take baptism as seriously as Ricky? What might happen if we did?

### **Program 2**

1. Have you written off any of the institutions that are important to you because you don’t see any possibility of redemption?
2. Jim suggests discrimination against women and racial exclusiveness as signs of fallenness in churches. What would you identify—in the local church and the church universal?
3. What does transformation look like; what does redemption look like, in person, in institutions?
4. What’s your reaction to this reflection from a viewer: “I am a lifelong recovering sinner participating in fallen institutions. While some are more fallen than others, I am at once dependent on, served by, rewarded by and sometimes abused by these fallen systems. How shall I live my life in the midst of this ‘truth’ and what does the church offer me as hope and a path for daily living?”

### **Program 3**

1. Which way of reading these teachings might be more risky (the old way or this new way)?
2. Is there anything in the teachings for those at the top—the slave master, the rich person who profits at the expense of others, the soldier who forces a captive to do his will?

3. Who in our society are commonly treated badly?
4. Where do you fit in the system—dominated or dominator?

### **Program 4**

1. Is Walter's interpretation fresh to you? Do you find it clarifying? How can we have misunderstood it?
2. In what ways is our society violent? Personally? Socially? Structurally?
3. Do you have stories of turning weakness into strength like Walter's? Can you think of other situations where it could be done?
4. How could training in nonviolent direct action be helpful to you or your church?

### **Program 5**

1. Have you ever said, "I wonder what got into him?" or "Something just came over her." Or "I don't know what possessed me"? Do these expressions relate to this program?
2. Can you talk about the spirit or angel of your church, your hospital, your workplace, your school?
3. Can you think of examples of fear keeping an institution from its vocation?
4. Is Jim's image of one-armed angels of capitalism and socialism helpful? What do you think God is calling economic systems to do?
5. If the church's task is to call institutions to their vocation or to be a bulldog, what might your church do?

### **Program 6**

1. Janet suggests that people on the margins of society are more likely than those in the mainstream to find God acting in the midst of life? What do you think?
2. What do you say to someone who says he or she has talked with God?
3. Have you had a mystic experience you couldn't talk about? Can you now?
4. Do you believe in miracles? Why?
5. Walter says we are the first generation in history with a choice of worldviews. But it's clear he thinks the integral worldview most reflects reality. What do you think? Do we really have a choice?

## **Program 7**

1. Have you had experiences like Walter's with the two boys who died from leukemia?
2. Have you experienced praying in what seemed like an impossible situation, like the girl in Janet's story?
3. Does the concept of powers that would interfere with God's will and block God's answer to prayers seem to fit with your own experience? Does it change your concept of God? Does it change your view of prayer?